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SUBJECT: Batticaloa Generally Calm Despite Recent Incidents Nearby; Eastern and Southeastern Universities Tranquil But Longing for Assistance

1. (U) SUMMARY: A recent trip to the Eastern Sri Lankan cities of Batticaloa and Oluvil by PAO and CAO revealed them to be generally calm, despite previous shootings not far from Batticaloa and skirmishes in the more northern city of Trincomalee after the November 27 Heroes' Day speech. Students at both Eastern University in Batticaloa and at South-Eastern University in Oluvil (a predominantly Muslim town) appeared more concerned about their exams and lack of resources than about current political tensions. End Summary.

2. (U) During a recent trip to visit Eastern University in Batticaloa and South-Eastern University in the small coastal town of Oluvil, PAO and CAO spoke with university officials, students, and a prominent advisor to the local Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission about the political situation in the East. The previous weeks had witnessed a number of incidents, including politically motivated shootings, in the Batticaloa district, and the visit took place immediately following skirmishes in the northeastern port of Trincomalee after ceremonies marking the annual Tamil Tigers' Heroes' Day. The city appeared generally calm, with LTTE Heroes' day banners and flags festooned at key intersections and temples. (Note: the trip ended before a series of violent incidents occurred in the Batticaloa area the week of December 6. End note). Eastern university students were attending classes normally, and deans and faculty reported no unusual tension in the city, despite the continuing rift between former LTTE Eastern commander Karuna and Tiger chief Prabhakaran.

3. (SBU) Emboffs also met in Batticaloa with Father Miller, a Jesuit priest resident in the town for 50 years and a prominent advisor to the local office of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission. Miller asserted that most residents of the city were happy Karuna had split from Prabhakaran in April, particularly merchants who were no longer paying the LTTE taxes. He added that the LTTE had tried several times to re-open offices it once had on many street corners, but refrained from doing so when the local police refused to guarantee them protection from Karuna cadres. Miller, who has had his own run-ins with the LTTE over collection of taxes on a coconut palm farm his order operates, felt support for Karuna remained quite strong in the region. Army checkpoints encountered while driving throughout the city appeared relatively lax.

4. (U) Southeastern University lies in the small, largely Muslim town of Oluvil, approximately a two-hour drive south of Batticaloa on narrow, pitted roads. The 10 year-old university, set on a campus outside the main town, was placid the morning of emboffs' visit. Post selected this university as the site of our second American Corner in Sri Lanka (after Kandy) in order to reach a segment of the population enjoying very little contact with Americans or American culture. Many students were initially suspicious of USG intentions in setting up an American corner, but following our explanations of what it entailed they understood it to be simply a benign section of the library where students could find out more about the United States. The university administration fully backed the establishment of the corner.

5. (U) COMMENT: While sporadic violence continues in the Batticaloa district, no large-scale skirmishes such as occurred in Jaffna and Trincomalee recently have taken place, and the city seems relatively calm. In the coming months, security permitting, post plans to program cultural events and visits more often in the East to keep in better touch with that poor, and sometimes neglected, part of the country. End Comment.
Lunstead